

For American Jews assimilation may be gauged in different ways. For example, one approach is to observe our behavior through a number of generations. In the first generation in America our ancestors ate gefilte fish and shmaltz herring; in the second, they ate lox and creamed herring; in the third, they ate nova scotia salmon and smoked whitefish; and in the fourth generation, they eat sushi and sea bass.

Adeena Sussman writes in a review on an upcoming documentary on the once significant International Bagel Bakers Union that “we began to see the bagel as an immigrant that came to America, struggled and strained, made it, and then ultimately assimilated. Today, the largest seller of bagels in America is Dunkin’ Donuts. It is nearly impossible to find old-style, hand rolled bagels.” In other words, the bagel has all but assimilated.

Not unlike children and grandchildren of other immigrant communities, Jewish assimilation can be measured by the food we eat and do not eat, and by the recipes being passed down and those being lost. Arnie Eisen, the Chancellor elect of JTS, observed that if our grandparents and great grandparents could come back and sit at our tables, they would be unable to understand our language and would not recognize the clothes we wear or the food we eat.

In the early 19th century when progressive Judaism began and certain leaders advocated for doing away with the dietary laws, they argued that keeping kosher separates Jews from the rest of society. Today our problem is not that we are socially distant from the non-Jewish world. We eat and drink, golf and travel, party and work together. In addition to significant religious reasons, what argument does this make today for keeping kosher as one way of strengthening our Jewish identity?

If you look up the word gentile in the dictionary, you will see that a gentile is someone who is not a Jew. Isn’t this amazing? There are seven billion people in the world defined by who they are not—they are not Jews who only number 15 million. Indeed, historically Judaism has given birth to Christianity, Islam, humanism and much more, but to define the entire world by not being Jewish is quite remarkable.

Yes, I am focusing on the issue of assimilation but not as many understandably do by addressing intermarriage. Adath Israel’s Keruv program is our and my response to the issue of intermarriage: to become as welcoming to intermarried couples and families as we possibly can and to make them feel at home in our Conservative synagogue.

My concern is what American Jews assimilate from the larger culture and how we are assimilating into the larger culture. Jews have always borrowed, learned and benefited from others. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi of the 3rd century envisioned Ezekiel the prophet admonishing our ancestors because they did not follow and learn from the good ways of the nations.

Some of our most favorite Shabbat and hasidic melodies are originally German, Russian or Polish in origin. Yiddish, Ladino and Farsi use other languages with Hebrew to create beautiful Jewish linguistic cultures. And our food: bagels, borscht, falafel and hummus, even our sweet Shabbat wine are from other peoples' kitchens and vineyards. In medieval times some of the most respected Jewish doctors, poets, legalists and philosophers studied with Muslim teachers. Our synagogue architecture was borrowed as well. Look at our own beautiful Plum Street Temple. The clothes most Hasidim wear today were originally the garb of the Polish gentry. All of these represent how Jews have assimilated from and not into the host culture. They incorporated the food, music, language and even clothes of the dominant culture in ways that everything took on a Jewish flavor, a Jewish taam. The music became Shabbat melodies and the food became kosher.

Think of the Midrash that asks why did the Israelites deserve being redeemed from Egypt and answers because they did not change their names, clothes or language. Written by rabbis living under Roman political and culture dominance, they knew the importance of distinguishing ourselves by the everyday aspects of our lives: our names, clothes and language. Why do so many of us take off our yarmulkes immediately after services often even before leaving the sanctuary and certainly before leaving the synagogue?

Many American Jews do not know their Jewish names. Few American Jews understand or speak Hebrew, we dress like everyone else and as already indicated we eat like everyone else. To discover your Jewish name and/or take on a Jewish name for the first time is a simple but wonderful and meaningful experience that I love helping congregants have. Similarly, taking Hebrew classes, even right here at Adath Israel, is also exciting and edifying endeavor.

Isaac Rosenfeld, who died in 1956, described Sholom Aleichem as a specialist in alienation as were other Jewish writers. Sholom Aleichem's humor depended on the alienation of immigrants and alienation's visible symbol, poverty. When Jewish immigrants began to make it economically, they were less alienated and more concerned with assimilating.

It is told of the Seligman banking family that William Seligman concerned about appearances told his brother, Joe—Yosel--that since they were becoming such influential bankers they should change their name. Joe said that he agreed and that William should change his name to schlemiel. How many of us would be comfortable going by our Jewish names? What was one of the first things that early Zionists like Ben Gurion did? They either changed their names or began using only their Jewish names. Now, some American Jewish parents give only Hebrew names to their children or minimally an English rendering of their Jewish names like Rachel or Jacob?

Israel Zangwill in the late 19th century maintained that assimilation is evaporation. Someone once said that the surest sign of assimilation is when a Jewish home does not smell like Shabbos on Friday afternoon. The aromas of Judaism have for many evaporated. I can still smell my grandparents' and parents' homes especially on Shabbos

and Yom Tov. As they say: “It’s always the food.” But it is not just the food, there are other concerns. For example, linguistically, I like many Ashkenazic Jews cannot easily pronounce the difference between the Hebrew letters alef and ayin—two different letters—and khaf and het—also two different letters. But on a larger scale of concern is how many American Jews cannot pronounce—at least not easily or comfortably—our eight day festival of Lights or the part of our anatomy that we sit on. When Jews sit on their tukkuses during Hanukkah and eat potato pancakes and not latkes, we got tzoris—not trouble, tzoris!

Bethamie Horowitz in an article in the Forward observed that when she and her sisters visited their mother’s grave they always removed the stones. They were not aware of the tradition that their father observed of putting a stone on their mother’s grave each time he visited and therefore, as Americans they thought they were supposed to keep the grave clean and neat. This particular example of assimilation is most poignant when we consider the increase in cremation among Jews in America.

Rabbi Eliezer Berkowitz points out that for modern Jews we have turned religion into a commodity, something we have and use for our own convenience, comfort and purposes. We have assimilated into a culture of narcissists even when it comes to Judaism that is essentially altruistic and demands our loyalty, service and dedication to something much bigger than ourselves. Throughout America Jews have become customers who want to be serviced in keeping with the marketplace culture we live in as compared to being congregants who want to serve. Many American Jews try to own simhahs and do so even when they are part of Shabbat services as compared to making their simhahs part of Shabbat with their congregational families.

Many American Jews have accepted religious fundamentalism or have a romantic idealized attitude about it as have so many of our fellow Christian Americans. Some think, albeit a different understanding, that this is another sign of our assimilating. When we suspend G-d given critical thinking so that we force the literal text to be the literal truth, we fail to appreciate how the truths of our Torah and other texts are too big to be contained by the literal word. As Karen Armstrong reminds us, religious myths contain truths beyond what a literal reading of a text can convey. Religious myths that exist among every traditional culture capture the heart and soul, mystery and magic, the hopes and aspirations of a people. Religious fundamentalism traps and limits, either burying truth or freezing it in time. To be concerned with proving the plagues in Egypt or the splitting of the sea happened exactly as described in Exodus distracts us from and distorts the message that G-d can be present in our world and lives; that G-d can be present wherever we let G-d in.

Paulo Coello wrote that religious fanaticism is the only way to put an end to the doubts that constantly trouble the human soul. Where is our Jewish humility acknowledging that being human means we are not able to know everything? We as humans must live with doubts. Proclaiming that we know the truth and have the truth and therefore, know exactly what everyone must do as so many non-Jewish groups do is void of Jewish integrity as to searching for truth through the times and places we live in with our G-d

given capacities to do so? Is present reality so frightening and our lives so empty that we are trying to find security and meaning through nostalgic Jewish living?

Rabbi Elliot Dorff and Rabbi David Gordis maintain that Jewish laws and practices that appear to us today as immoral, incorrect and unethical will or should undermine our allegiance to Jewish tradition. It is this humble and honest approach that informed and describes our movement's struggle with the inclusion of women and now informs and describes our wrestling with what is right regarding homosexuality. What connects us to our ancestors is our search for what is righteous and holy in our time and place as our rabbis did in theirs. The rabbis of the Talmud were much more pluralistic and accepting of diversity than they are so often represented as being. Some rabbis ate swordfish and some did not, some rabbis covered their heads and some did not, some rabbis taught that the entire Torah was given at Mt. Sinai and some did not.

Religion is to be a counter valuing force to and not a replica of society. When Judaism's social, political and economic values of thousands of years take back seat to other concerns, we have assimilated even further. At our seder last Pesah, when we encourage folks to ask questions, one guest asked: "When did Jews quit caring about other people's children?" Another question was, "how could we as Jews not be concerned with and supportive of immigrants given our history?" Or, "how do Jews allow their positions on social welfare be a function of money and not of mitzvah?" And, "how is it that Jews talk about other people in the same dehumanizing ways that so many others have talked about us?"

The Rhiziner Rebbe taught that every Jewish soul has a spark from the Light Above but that much depends on where Jews live. One can compare, he taught, Jews to precious stones that, when mixed in sand, are not discerned as being valuable. When we immerse ourselves indiscriminate of Jewish values in the soil of whatever land we live in, our infinite moral and ethical value as Jews is buried.

Solomon Ibn Verga of the 16th century noted that the ruling nation seeks to transform other peoples into its own image. What is going on in America now with the very real threat to the separation between religion and state? How can any Jew align him/herself for any reason with anyone who wants to erode, if you will, this holy divide? It is beyond my understanding why more Jews—especially in light of our particular history—are not more actively engaged as Americans in fighting this threat.

Hayim Greenberg, not Hank Greenberg, in an address he gave in 1951 said that "he would deplore the spiritual and moral fate of any country that imposed among the duties of citizenship an obligation of amnesia, of becoming oblivious of oneself, of erasing one's memories, one's past, one's intimate group relationships." Interestingly, I am confident that Hank Greenberg would strongly agree. What would Ibn Verga and Hayim Greenberg say today? When Jews assimilate, we forget. When Jews assimilate, we no longer know who we truly are. When Jews assimilate we live by values that are not necessarily ours. When we assimilate, we do not remember where we came from, what our purpose in life is and how we are never to do to anyone what so tragically so many

have done to us. When Jews assimilate, we no longer bring into Judaism the best of the cultures among whom we live; we give up the best of Judaism to live comfortably among these cultures.

When Jews assimilate, we lose our ability to speak, eat and dress comfortably as Jews. When we assimilate, we look and act like everyone else. When we live uniquely and proudly as Jews as part of a larger society as we can do, thank G-d, here in America then we can contribute significantly and benefit greatly without diluting our Judaism or having the Jewish flavor and aroma of our lives evaporate or the Jewish sights and sounds of our heritage be dimmed and silenced.

Rabbi Elyse Frishman encourages us to regard the Torah as our road map in living in America as Jews because to live as Jews is indeed a journey. We must interpret and apply the teachings, values, observances and rituals appropriate to the challenges and needs of our times and place. First, however, Rabbi Frishman notes we must open the map and keep it unfolded in front of us at all times. Just as we are free to travel confidently and safely throughout this country, we are free to live meaningfully and uniquely as Jews in America provided we do just that—live as Jews and not just like everyone else.

You know, if our grandparents and great grandparents could be back with us—al levai, it should only be—for Shabbat dinner, and even though they would not understand our language, recognize our clothes or food, we still would still be able to communicate with them through the Shabbat candles, the singing of Shalom Aleikhem, the blessing of our children, Kiddush and motzi. Our ancestors would understand this special language perfectly and shep great nachos from our speaking the same language they did. Yes, Shabbat in particular connects us across time and space; Shabbat is arguably the main dialect of this universal language that every generation of Jews—no matter from where or when—can speak. But Shabbat also represents for us all the beautiful observances, rituals and customs of our people and what it is to live uniquely, proudly and lovingly as Jews in America.

After Shabbat, a good place to start to turn the tide on assimilation as American Jews is by always pronouncing correctly the part of our anatomy that we sit on and to be sure our children and grandchildren do the same.

Shanah Tovah.